TOWER

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This book is dedicated to all dreamers —

To you who allow us, through the lens of imagery,
to see ourselves and this wondrous world more clearly.

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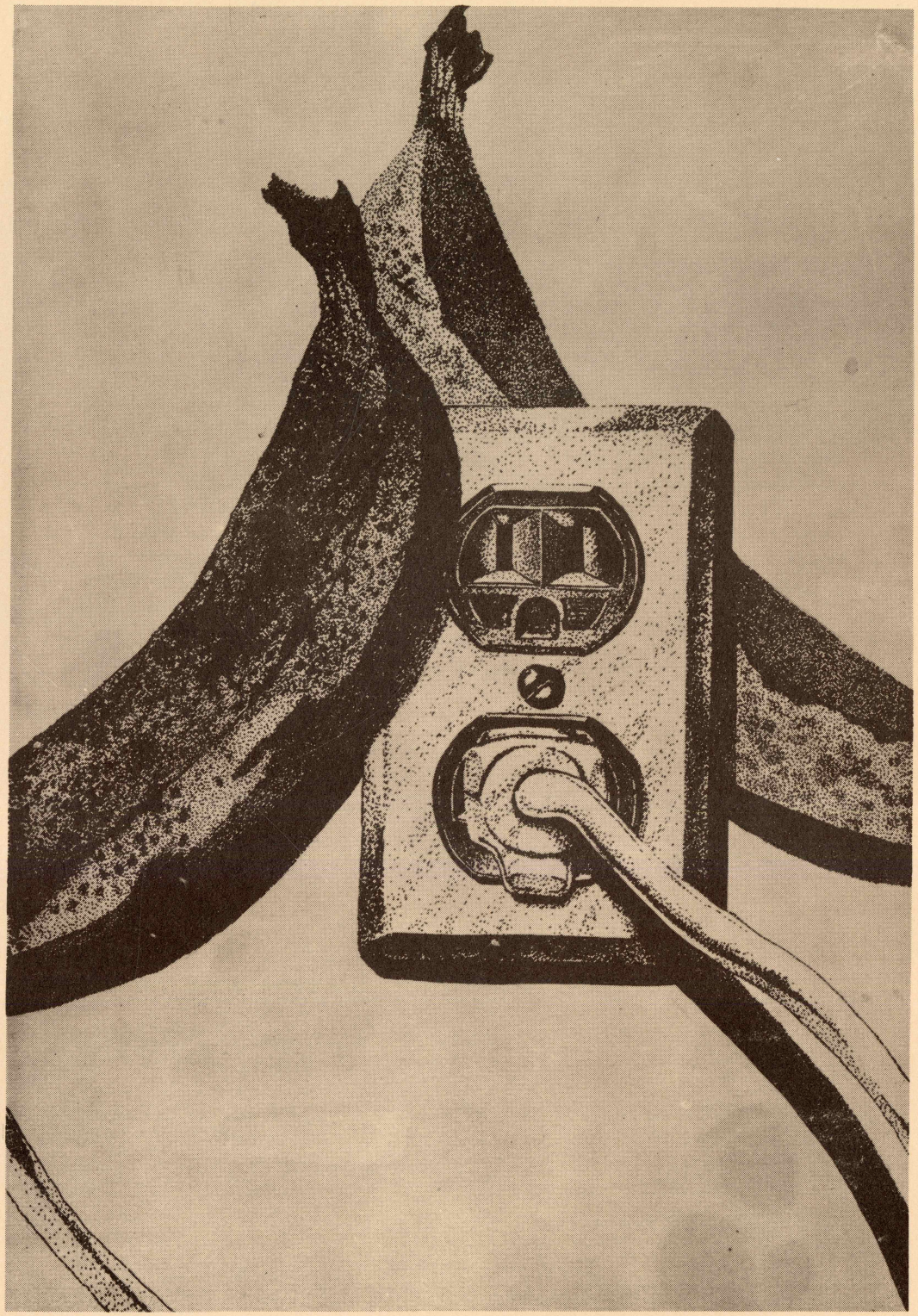
**Tower award
* Honorable mention

Neverlands

Once gone, I hear
There's no going back again.
Maybe so, but sometimes I
Wish so hard and I can still
Remember laughing easily enough
In a time and a place where
Nothing matters
    except a tire and a rope and
    a good sturdy tree . . .

— Marcia Mechler



— Mikki Posey

July 4th

a cotton candy day
and they just walked in
the music's playing
something about sweet dreams
there's easy laughter
loose smiles.
Someone says eventually
let's get food!
Well, what have we got?
everybody's looking for something . . .

let's travel the world.
(let's just make it to Birmingham)
let's make history!
(okay, you start first)
more laughter
giggles in the squiggles of spaghetti
salty music on the popcorn
hey, where's the ice cream?
(you pig, you finished it)

radio blares The Police
someone does Sting
(aw, give up, your hair's the wrong color)
laugh, laugh
then the sun goes down
time for fireworks!
no, watch the sunset first,
please?
so everyone watches.
Quietly as usual,
the sunset wins
but the fireworks get more
oohs and aahs
and everyone's happy
so why bother?
Yeah, everything's all right.

— Jacquie Wee

Childhood Armour

Children's souls are no more simple than our own
and their hearts are no more free.
Their hurts are just as harsh to them
as hurts are harsh to us.
They're building up the armour
that adulthood means you wear.
And so it takes a smaller knife
to cut a young heart twice as deeply.

— Naomi Metz

Reading Sweaters

It has been some years since sweaters arrived
from Grandma's knitting needles via U S mail.
It has been several seasons since my sisters and I
sported special knitted deliveries.
These handsome handknits make great bookmarks
in the story of my life.
When I see my youngest sister wearing woolens I wore way back when
I recall my childhood chapters.
As I pull on a plush pullover
or climb into a cardigan
I can read remembrances.
The threads of yarn are clues to mysterious memory.
It has been years since new sweaters from Grandma graced our grasp.
The miles between the graying and the growing go untraveled.
But today arrives an argyle ambassador
fresh from Grandma's knitting kingdom.
My sisters and I note silently
the sloppiness and slipped stitches.
Surprised, we see that the
    years are showing;
    years are slowing
Grandma's knitting needles.

—Naomi Metz

Revisited

Dancing through twenty,
I turned to my independence
for support but found your
hands wrapping me in
yesterday's honey sweet smiles –
As comforting as the strength
I found in your touch
at eighteen,
Aged as November's marigolds
but new as morning rain,
Touching my heart with
watercolor washed memories
of you in the moonlight
and the wine stained logic
of us in that corner
of my eighteenth year.

— Melody Lake

Pam Liss

Pride

It's not raining
outside anyway
I stand on a hillside —
Looking out at the night
I drop to my knees and I pray
"Oh Lord I was thinkin' about

A town

A place where lives the one I want to make understand
she's down in the town Lord
the one with the hair like the wind
and lips like the finest wine
oh how sweet was the night
when I held her close
Just watchin the world float on by
but I had to be a man Lord
and a man has got to be free

or he ain't really a man

several times I told her that
and in the end . . . . in the end well she threw it in my face
so now I'm going back into the town Lord
because I was wrong

It takes a good woman
to make a good man
so kinda turn your head Lord
while I swallow my pride
and do something I swore I'd never do
just keep this talk our secret
just between you and me
Lord, please."

So I stand up, brush off the leaves. I slowly turn,
square my shoulders, cough and face the shimmering
lights of the city.

— Calvin Elliott

Saxophone Man gone and play your song,
play your song
yeah
that's it, that's it
take me back
back
so sweet, so sweet
um huh
you got it, you got it
toes tapping
hands clapping
mouth rapping
hey baby, hey baby
What's your fancy?
money's right tonite
Fridays are always right
Play that song you . . . . . .
Another round for me and the LADY
Saxophone Man gone and play your song,
play your song
baby come on let's get down!
on the floor, on the floor
swing it darling
brang it on home to Daddy
yes, yes
Another round for EVERYBODY
Where you going baby?
I'm just having fun
with my friends
these are my friends
They LOVE me, They LOVE me!
Don't you walk out on me WITCH!
don't you know who I AM?!
I'm the MAN
Don't you leave me
Come back here WENCH!
go on, gone
I don't want you
don't need ya
Oohhh
Another round for my FRIENDS
what you mean ain't nobody but ME
My friends
All gone
well who needs 'em
who needs you
gimme my drink
my FRIEND
cry my tears with
hear my stories
celebrate with me
Saxophone Man why you playing that song man?
Don't play that song

— Felicia Ayers Walker

Portrait of Fall

Autumn comes rustling through the woods
Touching the trees with his paintbrushes.
A dab of orange here — yellow there.
The wind hurries him along
And all that remains
Are the trees trying to shed his paint.

— Lisa L. Brown

Sunday on the Quad

She told him she had
a sunset skirt of
brilliant pink, blue and orange
and he said, smiling,
that it sounded nice.

He told her he couldn't
write anymore
didn't know why he was
a dead artist
and she felt as though
she had just lost
her sunset skirt.

He told her that he saw
people as rivers
drifting till they became
waterfalls, then disappearing,
and she looked in his eyes
and saw her sunset skirt.

She told him to write again
and again he said he couldn't
but all the time he was talking
she could see waterfalls
and beautiful sunset skirts.

— Jacquie Wee

. . . *Skies*

. . . Skies
Tonight there's one of those skies we used
To sit and look at
Turning off the lights so we
Could see better,
But always turning them back on —
Prompted by the silken twilight
To write our letters to the world.
We would only get as far as pen in hand
When the lights would go out again
And the conversation begin
Lasting until the morning sun
Shocked us into realizations
And out of our reverie . . .

Tonight there's one of those skies we used
To sit and look at

— Barbara Goss

Words

Words
pulled, twisted, spun,
long, thin lines of
threadlike bare
mindloom weaving
woof and warp
over, in, over, out,
a pattern emerges
designed, desired

thoughts
colors — arranged
on cloth
stark, bold images
Fiery Red
pieced with deep felt blue
offset with trim
Magenta, Chartreuse,
(perfect for public wear)
Cloth
patterned with stripes of
doubt
Overtones — mystic gray
sash of untried fabric brown
(only at home to stay)

— Kathy Self

I have no poetry.
Perhaps I never was a poet,
The master of perfect rhyme and meter.
But the feeling flowed,
The words were there.

When I was a child
I wrote great tragedies in verse
Oh, how clever I was!
My verses filled my paper
Somehow capturing the pain of love
With such perfection
That my teacher laughed to keep from crying.
I taught my child my craft
Singing lullabys with bright, new words
Slightly flat and very loud.

But now the poems are gone.
They disappeared somewhere between
Shakespeare and Dryden.
In learning to love great poetry
I learned also to despise my own.

My doctor is a poet.
He gives me clever couplets with my bill.
Once I applauded so loudly
That he produced reams of verse
Composed, no doubt, between operations.
He wanted me to say they were good,
That I liked them.
I did.

He hadn't mastered perfect rhyme and meter.
But the feeling flowed,
The words were there.
I envy him.

— Susan Arledge

To Words Best Left Unsaid

I should leave this paper blank –
A pristine monument to awkward silences,
To words best left unsaid.
No, better I should spoil its purity
As I spoiled the purity
in our friendship.

Lines not to be crossed
Should be painted in bright, scarlet letters.
Yours was hidden in a haze of laughter.
A quick step backward –
But too late.
The friendship replaced, not with love
But only with an awful awareness of each other.

I should have left this paper blank.
I should have left the words unsaid.

Susan Arledge

To an Old Man
In Reply to Shakespeare's Sonnet 73

You need not tell me you are old. My young eyes are not blinded
To the signs of winter; the wrinkled skin or the dark beard turned white.
Nor is my spring-time love so warmly around me binded
That I cannot feel the chill of coming night.

I do behold in you the glimmer of a dying day,
When the sun shot down by his opponent Time
Is called to quietly surrender, but answers "nay"
And burst the sky with violent color before acquiescing to the grime.

You describe your life as fading embers
And say that of age my youthfulness will tire.
But I say it is the coals' warm glow that true love remembers
And not the short lived blaze of a random fire.

Our fear of your night must make Love dare.
It's scarcity of time that makes Love rare.

— Gina Palmer

Wasteland

I tread through
dark kingdoms
of wasteland
with my tired
yellow umbrella,
(made in Korea),
a plastic shield
against the loneliness
that pelts down
continuously —
drop
by
drop
filling my shoes
with an
empty sogginess.

I tread through
hostile grasses
that spit at me
and as I look down
helplessly,
they devour
greedily
the hems
of my
jeans.

— Jacquie Wee

death

death
closing of the i's
evokeness of a sorrow
(born of possessiveness)
at the loss
of a one loved
and held in the security of now
(but now is never
for forever)

death
opening of the eyes
to gaze (mystified and starry-eyed)
into a heavenmost paradise
of lay-down-your-soul
and rest.

— R. K. Cash

Short, Late Visit

Well, come in, there, Night
My friend — you old hermaphrodite!
We'll have a cup. Oh, does it hurt your eyes?
I'll dim the light.

Hoping you'd come by,
I need to finish this pot. Why —
You've but six hours? Gad! How your short time flies;
We've much to try —

Want sugar? No? Cream? —
For instance, why did you not scream,
Warn me of him, fill all your space with cries
Against his scheme?

(What is it like, Night, to be both filler and filled?
for you're phallic and field;
I'm aperture, 'lone.

Wind over ripples by frigid moonshine dappled;
You held your fiery ice,
Silent
While their icy fire reflected
From the whites of his eyes
A flame that burned my bridges
While it took my innocence.

Quivering in the earthquake passion of seeking
The spiritual plane may be reached
Only when love backs the thrust —
Otherwise its just space
filling space.)

It may be trite, my friend,
But I can say with clear hindsight,
Trust naught at night, that favorite time for lies,
And I'd be right.

No going, Night?
Too bad; quiet, without a fight
As all dark runs from minting skies —
Afraid of light.

— Martha McClendon

Untitled

Janus-faced
We move through life
With only tenuous hold upon the fore
Longing back toward the past
Dooming ourselves,
moondancing and sighing
starry sighs
For loves posthumous, already mouldering
Quick only in memory.

Look onward
For even now the thinly held forefield treasures
pass
and follow the current of
rapid poignant history
And the arms we should open
To welcome inception,
Long instead after last breaths
and dust.

Martha McClendon

The Postulant

I.

Bathed
and groomed
and naked,

I looked into the eyes,
the face, the head,

and fitted about them
the habit I want
that holy textile

that lures me from the world.

Those eyes, not insincere,
then looked at me

a sin in progress,
in glorious commission.

Habits laid aside,
others taken up,

Smoke unveils the newest one
the lips
and hands
and breasts
that do a sinner make

as well make prayers and signs

and promises.

II.

There is a priest here,
chanting her prayers
on the edge
of a goblet of wine,

Holy and unholy,

waiting to fall
the inevitable fall
into the redness
of death.

What can she give them
when she, herself,
needs sin
to make her real,

and it is light
that shows her
where the darkness is?

What can she tell them
when, asked
what she will give,

she says, "I want it all"?

III.

I meander to the edge,
sometimes running to it,
sometimes from.

And looking off,
there is the blackness
and the clear, illumined white,
the form and the shadow,

and there in the extreme
they burn the fagots
of a wholly perfect flame

whose unity would no less than consume,

my ashes used to mark the forehead
of a penitent
with gray.

Mary Anderson

Facades

Surrounded in a sea of faces
Drowning in their social graces
Growing tired of the task
In holding up the social mask
Leave the party and we find
The faces that were left behind
Have followed.

Never quite identifying
What it is that we're disguising
Been conditioned not to trust
When masks come down we find we must
Hide our hearts behind a screen
And never say just what we mean
And what we say
Is never heard
Below the surface of our words
Anyway.

— Marcia Mechler

Children of Flower Children

Unlike their parents they dress in death
bathed in black, clothed in chains.
Kohl slanted eyes stare to scare.
Their mothers wore their hair free and flowing
but these daughters crop it close.
The look is of electric shock
strands stand on end.
Flower children sang love and freedom
and raised calm fingers in the sign of peace.
Today their children sneer and spit
and thrust up fists.

Naomi Metz

Hail the Power

Watchdog of justice — who watches you?
Con men sing again to crucify someone new.
Sacrificed blood has become your sustenance.
So confess the sins of a few unfortunate men
to assure their just penance.
Damning the innocent along with the accused.
Inform the masses; keep them amused.
March then for justice — search for the truth.
The righteous crusaders armed in three-piece suits.
Babbling Harlequin, I don't believe a word you say.
Almighty media, whose truth do you sell today?

— Teri Wilbanks

I'm sorry I shot you.
The memory of your agonizing scream,
and terrified, lifeless eyes
Will cut into my very soul and awaken me
In bitter nights to come.

But this war we are fighting
led me on,
And I was fighting for my life.

— Andrew Cawthon

The Free Dream
Lament of an Afghani

I have seen our land in an old man walking —
Slowly shuffling through the ancient street,
In boots and turban, he sits with his friends
Watching the tanks roll by and boasting of empty glories past.

I have seen our dream in a horseman riding —
Wild and furious on a pure black mare.
Later he will stroke her nose and sing her gentle songs
But now, while freedom and daylight are still theirs,
They take the sands like two possessed by fire.

I have seen our land in the family at nightfall fleeing
To the Pakistani border and the hopeless liberty of refugee camps.
With heavy packs bound to their shoulders by course rope,
They grasp the hand of their sleepy child
And mount unsteady feet on the rugged steeps to freedom.

I have seen our dream in a caravan leaving —
In a young girl with braided hair and a silver-belled cap.
Clad in reds and greens and purples,
Her people have bought and traded and sold and stolen
In this village and others.
Yet, as the soldiers escort them to the border, we grieve.
They will never return to us again.

I have seen our land by soldiers trampled —
As they march past us in indifferent boots
To liberate us from ourselves —
Under a flag as scarlet as the blood of our slaughtered sons.

I have seen our dream in a young rebel stalking
Soldiers in the city streets,
Slowly, silently, he moves — like a serpent gliding
Then strikes, swift and fierce,
Before retreating to the places where patriots take refuge.

I have seen that dream by the bullet ended,
In a fresh grave lying. The lament of an Afghani is quieted.

I have seen our land — our dream — the Free Dream.
And in the company of rebels I dwell in the Hindu Kush.
I have stood on the mountaintop, taken a gun in my hand,
And thrust our dream towards the sky —
Vowing that as long as one lived who believed and fought,
That our land, our Free Dream, would never be taken from us.

But then, Hope leaned over a ledge
And spat upon my head,
And the mountains mimicked me
With scornful echoes.

— Gina Palmer

Promises

New York to Atlanta. It seemed as if that flight schedule had been my whole life for the past six months. I made the trip three times a month, but this time I wasn't looking forward to coming home. Walking into an empty house had no appeal to me today. I used to enjoy a few hours alone to unwind from the trip, but today I wished I just didnt have to go home at all. I felt as if I had nothing to go home to.

For the first time, I noticed the girl sitting next to me. She must have been about twenty. Had I really been twenty only seven years ago? It seems like a lifetime away. The girl, unlike me, seemed anxious to be off the plane. She had a bag of gifts, marked with the name of a famous London department store, clutched to her chest. She was twisting a small gold and diamond ring which she wore on her third finger, left hand.

The girl noticed me watching her and smiled at me happily. She asked me how soon we would be landing in Atlanta. I told her that the plane should land in about forty-five minutes. She sighed and told me that she couldn't wait to get home to her boyfriend. She said that she had been studying in England for the last six months and that she hadn't been able to afford to come home for Christmas, so she was really feeling homesick. She wanted to get married as soon as possible, but her boyfriend insisted that they wait until they both finished their education. He was in law school. I told her that it seemed like a good idea to me. David and I had been like that once. Him so practical and me so impulsive. What had happened to us? We didn't have that magic anymore.

As the girl talked, I sat thinking of how David and I had been seven, eight years ago. I had won. We got married while we were in school. I had finished, but David had decided that law school wasn't his bag and had gone into business instead. And then we started to grow farther apart from each other every day. We each had our own lives now. We shared little, except a house that we really couldn't afford and the painful memory of the little girl we had lost four years ago. I absently listened to the girl tell me about her boyfriend and how much she missed him. It seemed like forever since I had missed David. I was glad to be away from him most of the time.

I fastened my seatbelt as the pilot announced our approach of the Atlanta airport. The girl stopped talking and started twisting her ring again. A promise ring. David and I had made promises once. In another lifetime.

When the plane landed, the girl was ready to be the first passenger off the plane. I was actually jealous of this girl. Me, with my successful career, (my boss says I'll make it to the Supreme Court before I am forty), my beautiful home and husband, jealous of a twenty-year-old student. It was amazing. Crazy.

As we deplaned, the girl and I were separated. I watched her run to the boy with a large bunch of flowers in his hands. I watched as they held each other as if they would never let go. I saw the tears run down their faces and felt the salty sting of moisture in my own eyes.

As I made my way from the baggage claim to my car, I laughed at myself. I had everything I had ever wanted out of my life. Except happiness. And love. Where had the love gone? The promises? As I slowly made my way home through the maddening traffic, tears fell silently down my cheeks.

— Suzanne Ford

A Parable

Once in the land of Kronth, a land of trees and grasses, there came a-journeying a man named Aziz from the desert kingdom of Shamon. And in the land of Kronth, the desert man was often seen beneath a shade tree, sitting on a rough carpet of grass as the wind lifted and tangled his beard, and the coolness of the breezes refreshed his sun-beaten skin. Yet, he dreamed of his desert but could not bear to leave the gentleness of the land of trees.

Thus, the desert traveler came to abide in Kronth and became a great man among his neighbors. He bowed low to his new king and was thus esteemed high and the court marveled that this desert man should show more honor for their king and more love for their land than they themselves bore for either.

But many people whispered against Aziz in jealousy and hate, that he, a foreigner, should rise so high so quickly while they, the citizens of Kronth, remained exactly where they had been before the desert man came into the land of trees. In their resentment they — from day to night and night to day — began to curse their king in one breath and Aziz in the next until eventually, they suffocated by their own hate.

In the courtyard of the king, there was a garden where many fragrant flowers bloomed, and often the desert man was seen there, just gazing in sad wonder at the flowers. One day the king, spying Aziz in the garden and the sorrow on his face, asked, "Why look you so sad?"

"Because the people of my land have never seen flowers of this sort — pale, thornless, and fragile. And I pity them," replied Aziz.

"Indeed," sympathized the king, "it is pitiful to never have beheld this beauty or have your nostrils swelled with the scent of hyacinth. It is pitiful indeed."

After the dawnings of many mornings and the passing of many stars across the face of many nights, Aziz still dwelt in his sorrow. Thus, the king made for his friend a banquet at the palace and invited all the court: jesters, musicians, dancers, statesmen, learned and holy men, women who sparkled as bright and brash as the jewels about their necks, and ladies who wore their beauty like a burial shroud. All these did the king gather to pay homage to his friend.

And that night the guest of honor did glory in the warm kindness of his friend. Through the night, Aziz feasted with the court, counseled with the holy and learned men, argued with the statesmen, and laughed shallowly at the jester for he was in want of mirth. And the desert man did dance with the ladies with steps correct and precise. But his body soon wearied from the grand coldness of meticulous movement and the musician's instruments screeched in his ears like the cry of a falcon on the hunt. He longed for the wilder music of the flute and zither and timbrel, and thus, he resolved to return to the desert kingdom.

On the next morrow's dawning, he gathered his belongings. Before he began his journey home, he visited the grandest gardens in Kronth and from them selected three gentle flowers to take back to his homeland. And thus, he rode from dusk to dusk until his eyes beheld the fortress walls of Shamon, and he cried with joy.

When Aziz came to his own dwelling, he thought, "It would be selfish of me to plant all these flowers in my private garden for then no one else would see them." So he planted one flower in a pot in his own window so that it could dwell in his eyes and be a joy to his heart. The second flower Aziz gave to the king of Shamon who planted it in the imperial garden alongside the bushy, pampered jasmine and the defiant, thorny rose. The king sent his servants to tend the new flower, that it might be the envy of all the other desert kingdoms. And of the third flower Aziz said, "The last flower of gentleness I shall plant in the desert that the common man may behold it and that the caravans that pass by may be dazzled by its loveliness." and that was what he did.

The first flower, that which was planted in his own window, became the joy of Aziz. Each day he would water its roots and with his fingers gently apply water to its leaves lest they become dry. It came to be said that the man became kinder, more gentle, and learned patience through his love for the flower; he had learned to cherish its beauty and therefore, he tended it as he would his own soul. And through his devotion, the plant grew larger until its old pot could not contain the new blossoms that filled it.

The second flower, that which was in the imperial garden, fared not so well. The lazy indifference of the jasmine caused it to allow its roots to stretch over into the new plant's space, and the aggressive rose unknowingly thrust its thorny vines around the new flower, and the sun beat heavily from above. The servants were soon distraught and went to their master saying, "We have toiled and labored with this plant but its stalk grows brown and soft. That flower is fragile, created for tree-lined lanes not desert heat. We know not how to tend this plant."

So the king sent for gardeners from Kronth in hopes they would know better how to mind the flower. When the gardeners arrived, they scorned the servants, saying, "Why, in our land that flower grows wild along the roadside and no one pays any attention to it. These ignorant desert people, unable to care for such simple horticulture as this!" And thereafter, the gardeners began to work with the plant. Having no success, they proclaimed, "It is the rose and the jasmine. They impose themselves on the flower of Kronth. The jasmine deliberately chokes it from beneath and the rose savagely pierces it from above. These two plants must be uprooted and destroyed!"

"No!" proclaimed the king. "For centuries there have always been jasmine and roses in the imperial garden."

"And," added the servants, "you claim the jasmine and

the rose impose themselves on the new flower, but, in truth, is it not the new flower which imposes itself on the rose and the jasmine by demanding their destruction because it is unable to adapt to the desert? You men of Kronth ignore the fact that the imposing mass of jasmine also shades the new flower from the sun, and the savage thorns of the rose protect your flower from small animals and meddlesome children. Our flowers make many concessions for yours, yet you still curse them. So if any flower is to be uprooted, it should be the new one!"

The king rose in anger. "Fools, idiots! Why are you so obsessed with destruction? I still believe the two can live in harmony in the same garden. You men of Kronth, you know of the flower and it fragility, but you should not despise my servants for they have tended my gardens well for many years. They know the ways of flowers native to this heat. So you men shall all work together, sharing your knowledge, until you resolve a way to make the new plant thrive, after which you gardeners may return to Kronth and you, my servants, shall have knowledge to tend the plant alone."

After much debate, the jasmine was uprooted and replanted a few feet further from the new flower so as not to disturb it, and the branches of the rose were cut back. The gardeners of Kronth said, "See, we have secured a place for the new flower without destroying the old. We only clipped them and shook their roots."

"By the clipping and the shaking, you have destroyed them," said the servants, "for the jasmine and the rose were once thought to be eternal, unalterable — like the sky and the sand."

"The sky and the sand can be altered by a gust of wind. You are silly; all plants must die sometime. We have let yours live a while longer."

"Thank you," replied the servants sarcastically. "Your consideration overwhelms us."

"You're welcome," replied the gardeners.

Eventually, the new flower began to strengthen. Its stalk grew green and tall and appeared healthy. But to this day, the flower blooms rarely and then only at night, for its petals are wilted by the dawning sun.

You will ask, "What of the third flower?" Well, a few days after it had been planted, Aziz went to check its progress, but when he arrived in the desert, he could not find the flower. He looked and searched and queried over its disappearance. Then he questioned aloud to himself, "Where is my flower?"

"It is here, human," replied a low raspy voice. Aziz looked down and there coiled about the dead stub-like stalk of the flower was an asp. "The flower is engulfed within my coils. What do you wish with it?"

"I planted it here, for I longed that others might see its beauty," explained Aziz, "for there should be some beauty in the desert."

"What?" hissed the serpent, rising. "Are not the blooms of the cactus flowers beautiful enough for you? Is not the desert itself beautiful? Eternal straits of sand, constantly changing, mighty, ancient, and unconquerable. Many have claimed it for their domain, but none can totally possess it for it possesses them first. It is no man's slave and every desert dweller's master and it is beautiful! And what of myself? Am I not beautiful? I am small, fragile, and quick, and I am graceful." With this, the serpent uncoiled himself, wriggled on the ground in fiery brilliance forming magnificent patterns in the sand, and sang joyously, "Can you say that there is any dancer who moves with more delicacy and grace than I? When I dance, all creatures watch me."

The man answered, "But you are deadly; therefore, you can not be beautiful. And you are small and could be beheaded by a woman with a hoe or crushed by the wheel of a cart or a child with a large rock. You aren't nearly as intimidating as the cobra is, either."

"I am small and, yes, my hooded cousin is grand, but my bite is just as deadly and my small size aids in my survival. I may not have the power to crush a man but I can make him crumble in pain to the ground at my bite. My venom can move his mind to madness and the sight of me can move his heart to fear. Let a man approach me, as you have, with no weapon and we shall see who is mightier!" hissed the asp indignantly.

"I did not come here to challenge you," said Aziz. "What of my flower?"

"One morning," began the snake, "a young woman, whose father is a maker of goat cheeses, came upon the flower on her way to market to sell her wares. She, being moved by the beauty of the flower, plucked one of its blooms and took it to her sweetheart. He, being careless and unsentimental, lost it at the bazaar and the blossom fell to the street where it was trampled upon by the feet of merchants, buyers, whores, and holy men, and, later, urinated upon by a dog. The other blossoms wilted in the sun — a much nobler death."

"But how came the stem to be broken? Did you strangle it with your coils in jealousy?" cried Aziz angrily.

"No," replied the asp, somewhat irritated. "The stem was broken by the hoofs of camels and horses as the caravan passed. I felt pity for it. Now my coils shade it from the sun and if life ever returns to it, I shall guard it from man and maiden and camel and horse, for they know me and, therefore, fear me. No creature treads upon the body of a coiled asp and lives."

"You speak true," said Aziz, "but why did not the camel drivers and horsemen have mercy upon this gentle thing and drive around it?"

"You are ignorant, human! Stupid men have no mercy and wise men mistake mercy for justice and, in its abuse, make mercy a weak thing respected by none."

And the desert man began to weep and lament the destruction of the gentle and the beautiful. He cursed the caravan, the bazaar shoppers, and the thoughtless young man. The snake rose angrily and hissed, "Why do you curse them? You are just as much to blame. You brought the flower here to die! Leave me, human, for you weary me. Take your weeping to the land where you got the flower for that is where you belong. Gentle things were not meant to live in the desert, but to die there!"

Aziz departed in silence, walking away slowly. The serpent wiggled once more over to the remains of the flower, coiled itself around the stem, and went to sleep.

— Felicia Ayers Walker

Fiction Winner, Division II, Carmichael Library Book Review Competition. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, (Washington Square Press, 1982), reviewed by Rebecca Thompson.

To Enter Into Creation

The opening words of *The Color Purple* punctuate the intensity of a fourteen-year-old's rape by her stepfather: "You better not tell anybody but God. It'd kill your mammy." This opening threat spurs the reader into the tale of a black woman maturing in the Abolitionist period, the story of a female struggling for independence from male domination. In this black woman's letters to God, Alice Walker gives us far more than a mere Negro history with feminist appeal; she reaches beyond the obvious boundaries of color and sex to relate to a human being's struggle for identity, a struggle that culminates in this knowledge: love redeems all. This theme was painted vividly enough in the novel to earn it the 1983 American Book Award and Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. With a handful of literary seeds, such as vivid colloquialism, an effective point of view, detailed imagery, and a universal central figure, Alice Walker compels us to enjoy the harvest in her universal theme of love. This reviewer, in agreement with a host of others in such magazines as *Time* and *The Nation,* urges you to taste this novel's succulent feast.

Alice Walker's earlier works, *Meridian* and *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down,* reflect the themes of man's estrangement from woman and of the black woman's struggle. In these works, the author presents the black world in a frank style that reveals, without emotional gushiness, her explorations of a woman's struggle to exist in the fact of life. Walker writes primarily about women — women who make their own way, women who are fighters.

And a fighter is what Celie, the central figure of *The Color Purple,* eventually becomes. But first she is a doormat. In letters to God, Celie, a barely literate, black southerner, reveals her yearnings to escape the cruelty of men who dominate her.

As a teenager, Celie, repeatedly raped by her stepfather, bears two children who are taken from her. She then enters a forced and loveless marriage with a widower, Albert, whom she can only bear to address as Mr. ----. He abuses her both physically and emotionally. For a time, Celie is stoic.

But then, through love, Celie awakens. Ironically, a lusty vivacious blues singer, Shug Avery, who is Albert's mistress, becomes Celie's friend and confidante — teaching her for the first time about love, about giving and receiving. Celie's daughter-in-law, Sofia, an independent soul, teaches Celie about assertiveness. Thus the "doormat" gains courage enough to free herself from the absolute control of her husband. Free in spirit, Celie moves to Memphis with Shug to start her own business making and designing pants. Through trials, Celie is eventually reunited with her estranged sister Nettie and her own two children. Finally, Celie reconciles with Albert.

Besides rather stereotyped portraits of the males and an abrupt, seemingly unrealistic, character change in Albert, *The Color Purple* is virtually flawless — in fact, it is exquisite. This powerful novel forces the reader to step off the porch of the obvious theme of female oppression onto the path of a more universal journey towards the realization of self worth, of knowing that love redeems. Walker communicates this universal theme to both sexes and all races. Walker pours out a cornucopia of literary devices to entice the reader to her succulent feast.

One strength of *The Color Purple* is the colloquialisms and slang expressions Celie uses in her revelations. These idioms help the reader identify with Celie personally and her barely literate black culture. For example, the black perspective in contrast to the white outlook underscores one character's comment: "White people busy celebrating they independence from England July 4th . . . . so more black folks don't have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other." Furthermore, these colloquialisms identify the reader with Celie's emotions. For grief and horror intensify Celie's recollection of her mother's death: "My mama die. She die screaming and cussing." And joy resounds in her enumeration: "Now I know Nettie is alive, I begin to strut a little."

Besides Celie's effective colloquialisms, a second strength of *The Color Purple* lies in its point of view; the author skillfully presents a complex story through a simple first person narration — through Celie's letters to God and to Nettie. Walker also includes a few letters from Nettie herself. Not only is this short letter form easy to follow, but the first person narrative allows for an intimate point of view that helps the reader identify more closely with Celie. For example, in Celie, Walker presents a complex situation from a naive, simplistic, barely literate perspective. One instance is fourteen-year-old Celie's response when her mother asked where Celie's baby came from: "She ast . . . whose it is: I say God's. I don't know no other man or what else to say . . . she ast where it is? I say God took it." This first person point of view makes the experience that much more heartbreaking.

Also, in presenting the story through letters, Walker is able to shift the point of view to add variety by emphasizing different aspects of the novel's themes. For example, Nettie's letters to Celie bolster the broad theme of female oppression by showing the parallel customs of male dominance in the Olinka tribe of Africa where Nettie is a missionary: "The women do not 'look in man's face' as they say. To 'look in man's face' is a brazen thing to do. They look instead at his feet or his knees."

Another strength of *The Color Purple* is stark, detailed imagery. First of all, Walker's specific descriptions lighten her "heavy" narrative with hilarious humor. In one example, Harpo, Celie's stepson, endeavors endlessly to change his assertive, independent wife, Sofia, into a meek and model helpmate. Since Sofia fights back by throwing furniture, Harpo, reacts rather pitifully: "Harpo sitting

on the steps, crying like his heart gon break. Oh boo-hoo and boo-hoo. He got his head in his hands and snot running down his nose." In yet another example, a fight between Sofia and Squeak, her husband's girlfriend, takes on slapstick proportions: "Sofia getting little tired of Squeak, I can tell by her ears. They sort of push back . . . . Sofia don't even deal in such ladyish things as slaps . . . she knock two of Squeak's side teef out."

Not only does Walker's imagery give comic relief, the detailed passages also intensify the story's impact on the reader. For instance, in a description of Celie's childbirth, the adolescent's naivette and pathos pour out: "When I start to hurt and then my stomach start moving and then that little baby come out . . . . . chewing on it fist you could have knock me over with a feather." In another example, Celie's resentment is almost physically tangible. For, as she pours water for Albert's father, also called Mr. ----, after he has derided Celie's beloved Shug, the vengeful woman plots: "I drop a little spit in Mr. ----water . . . . I twirl the spit round with my finger. I think bout ground glass . . . . Next time he come I put a little Shug Avery pee in his glass. See how he like that."

And the color purple? This is yet another piece of detailed imagery that adds a subtle touch to the novel — purple symbolizes the majesty and splendor Celie longs for. For instance, when Celie searches for purple material for a new dress, she cannot find it; that splendor is not for her — yet. In Memphis, the city where Celie builds a life with Shug, she sleeps in a bedroom of purple; she is finally surrounded by that majesty she has craved. And at last, Celie shares a little of that serene splendor with others in a lovingly crafted pair of pants for Sofia that have one red leg and one purple leg: "I dream Sofia wearing these pants, one day she was jumping over the moon."

Yet, the triumph of Walker's novel is the universal figure she creates in Celie. To this poor, barely literate female's simple nature the author adds an underlying symbolism, a dash of great literary vision. Like Shakespeare's Lear, Celie suffers, doubts, but learns forgiveness. Like the Biblical Job, Celie loses all that she holds dear, questions the justice of this and doubts God, yet finally finds peace in fellowship with Him.

In one universal quality, Celie suffers loss. She confides in Shug: "My mama die . . . my sister Nettie ran away. Mr. ---- come get me to take care of his rotten children. He never ast me anything about myself . . . nobody ever love me." Furthermore, Celie suffers a loss of dignity and self-worth. In describing her sex life with Albert, Celie despairs, "He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in . . . . Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep."

In yet another universal character transition, Celie turns to bitterness after these losses. For example, she shows her repressed resentment in the words: "I make myself wood . . . . Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man."

Also, in a third universal vein, Celie questions God. She quits writing to Him in her letters because of her doubt: "I don't write to God no more . . . . What God do for me? . . . . Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know."

But finally, in a last great dash of literary vision, Celie turns from bitterness and doubt to a universal conclusion: love redeems all. And so, through love, Celie finds the strength to say farewell to Mr. ----, Albert: "You low-down dog, she said . . . . it's time to leave you and enter into creation." Yet as Celie grows in self-esteem, she reaches the point of forgiveness. She finds that to "enter into creation" she must put worries about what life doles out to her aside and learn to love. This awareness culminates in her reconciliation with Albert. On their front porch, Albert reflects, "I start to wonder why us need love. Why us suffer. Why us black . . . . the more I wonder . . . . the more I love." Celie responds, "And the more people start to love you back I bet. I say, but let's us be friends." And then the old woman's next lines punctuate her inward peace: "Shug write me she be coming home . . . . If she come, I be happy. If she don't, I be content . . . . and then I figure this was the lesson I was supposed to learn."

In conclusion, *The Color Purple* reflects what Alice Walker once said of her own life: "Much of it was hurt . . . . But I learned you can get a lot out of whatever happens to you." Celie does indeed get a lot out of what happens to her — the triumphant understanding that love redeems all. In Celie, Walker transcends racial, sexual, and economic barriers, leaving us with serene reassurance that in love we can survive — even prevail. *The Color Purple* is Alice Walker's personal invitation to "enter into creation." I personally laud her exquisite work with her own final words: "Amen."

Non-Fiction Winner, Division II, Carmichael Library Book Review Competition. *Growing Up* by Russell Baker, (Congdon & Weed, Inc., New York, 1982), reviewed by Scott Brunner.

"Making Something" of Himself

It was a bleak day in 1933 in the very depths of the Great Depression. Lucy Elizabeth Baker stood in front of her eight-year-old son Russell, discouraged after his first day's work selling magazines — a futile day since he had made no sale. But she was firm: "If you think I'm going to raise a good-for-nothing, you've got another think coming!"

And so on that day, Russell Baker began to grow up. It was the profound influence of this strong woman who insisted that he "make something" of himself that was a determining factor in Baker's success.

Growing Up, an engrossing memoir of the author's childhood in the South during the Depression, is a sometimes poignant, often humorous account of the formative years in the life of one of America's better known columnists. But this book is more than a chronicle of the events of the author's life: it focuses on emotions and attitudes. Baker does more than tell us what happened; he shows us how he felt, how he changed. In the words of reviewer Richard Lingeman, the book is "touching and funny, a hopeless muddle of sadness and laughter that bears a suspicious resemblance to real life."

Russell Baker, the well-established journalist and author, began his career in 1947 when he was hired by the *Baltimore Sun.* Joining the New York Times in 1954, he began to cover the White House and Congress. For his "Observer" column, which he began in 1962 in the *Times,* he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1979. *Growing Up* is Baker's ninth book.

Appropriately, Baker begins his memoir in the present with a recollection of his mother:

> At the age of eighty my mother had her last bad fall, and after that her mind wandered free through time. Some days she went to weddings and funerals that had taken place half a century earlier. On others she presided over family dinners cooked on Sunday afternoons for children who were now gray with age. Through all this she lay in bed but moved across time, traveling with a speed and ease beyond the gift of modern science.
>
> "Where's Russell?" she asked one day when I came to visit at the nursing home.
>
> She gazed at this improbably overgrown figure out of an inconceivable past and promptly dismissed it.
>
> "Russell's only this big," she said, holding her hand, palm down, two feet from the floor.

He then returns to the far past that his senile mother so enjoys recalling.

Russell Baker was born in a small village in the Virginia mountains. His father, a stonemason, died of the synergism of diabetes and corn whiskey in 1929 when the author was only four years old. His mother, on the eve of the Great Depression, was left with three children and no way to support them. Living with first one relative, then another and another, Baker's mother somehow managed to keep the family fed and clothed.

"My mother was already laying plans for a long hard struggle to come up from the bottom," writes Baker, "and I was central to them. I would make something of myself, and if I lacked the grit to do it, well, then she would make me make something of myself. I would become the proof of the strength of her womanhood."

So Baker, who in his mother's words had "no more gumption than a bump on a log," sold magazines in an effort to break in to the world of business. The results were not promising:

> Three years in that job, which I would have gladly quit after the first day except for her insistence, produced at least one valuable result. My mother concluded that I would never make something of myself by pursuing a life in business and started considering careers that demanded less competitive zeal . . . . "Buddy," she said, "Maybe you could be a writer."

But for young Russell, the idea of going to college was out of the question, or so it seemed to him. But his mother thought otherwise:

> Friends began asking her what Russell planned to do when he graduated, and her answer was, "Something will come along." She didn't know what, and nothing was in sight on the horizon, but she'd survived so long now on faith that something always came along for people who did their best. "Russ hasn't made up his mind yet, but something will come along," she told people.

The "something" that came along was an academic scholarship to Johns-Hopkins. Baker and his mother were overjoyed:

> We had helped ourselves, the Lord had helped us in return, and one of her wildest dreams had come true. Something had come along.

Obviously a prevailing theme of this memoir is the sustaining influence of a strong-willed mother on a son. Baker tells of benefiting from his mother's strength and surviving it: he somehow accommodated her relentless but loving wishes without being dominated. Even when he fell in love with a beautiful young woman, his mother did not easily give in. "Mimi," writes Baker, "was not my mother's idea of 'a good woman.' "

Also prominent in *Growing Up* is the theme of the Great Depression. Baker centers the story of his "growing up" around painfully wonderful characters in suspiciously real circumstances that allow us to feel the Depression as he felt it. "We lived on coffee and talk," he writes. "Talking was the Great Depression pastime. Unlike the movies, talk was free, and a great river of talk flowed through the house." He introduces dozens of richly

realized characters who lived in those times: Ida Rebecca, the stoney matriarch with twelve sons; a semi-famous bootlegger who was "bottled in a glass coffin"; Uncle Allen, who "wore pearl gray spats, detachable collars, a three-piece suit, was happily married, and took in threadbare relatives"; Uncle Harold, who waited forever "for his ship to come in"; Uncle Charlie, who spent his life indoors; Lying Uncle Hall, who swore that he could remember being born; Swearing Aunt Pat, and numerous other relatives, great teachers, and friends — everyday heroes who faced misfortune with high hopes, and who somehow pulled through.

So well-written is *Growing Up* that the reader must indeed search for flaws in this memoir. His reaction when he finishes the book is that *Growing Up* is as nearly perfect an autobiography as one can find. Though the author may stress the difficulties and disasters of the Depression too much for the taste of some younger readers, most older readers will relish these details which serve to add to the authenticity of this account of the Great Depression.

In spite of the deprivation the author suffered during the Depression, he still recalls many happy moments, good times. Looking back years later, Russell Baker could still present his "growing up" — its ironies, ambivalences, and struggles — so that the reader is not depressed; rather he experiences a sense of joy, of elation — is even inspired. Once again the reader can have his faith reaffirmed — can believe again that "something will come along." All that is necessary is one human being to believe in us — as the author's mother believed in her son Russell.

Thus it is fitting that Russell Baker conclude his memoir with a final visit to this aged woman as she lay ill in a nursing home:

> . . . She tried to open her eyelids to stare at me. "Who're you?" she whispered.
>
> "Russell," I said.
>
> Her eyelids closed again. "You remember Russell," I said. "And Mimi. You remember Mimi."
>
> She glared at me the way I had so often seen her glare at a dolt. "Never heard of them," she said, and fell asleep.

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